

## Mediawatch

### The dinosaur flap

Richard F. Harris

You know a story must have some truly delicious ingredients in order for it to bubble along for well over a century. And this one has just about everything short of sex: dinosaurs and birds are the meat in the story; and the sauce is a scientific disagreement nearly bordering on a blood feud.

Thomas Henry Huxley started it all shortly after 1861, when the feathered fossils of *Archaeopteryx* were unearthed in Bavaria. Those, he asserted, were a transitional form between reptiles and birds. And the debate has been simmering ever since. Are those favored creatures nibbling away at the backyard feeder direct descendants of dinosaurs — or better yet, living dinosaurs themselves? The paleontology establishment is fairly resolute on the matter: absolutely, it says. But a small, vocal band of ornithologists says: absolutely not.

Science reporters simply can't resist returning to this story from one year to the next. And paleontologists kindly offer new opportunities with regularity, as they dig up new fossils that fan the debate. The latest bunch are some feathered dinosaur fossils from China, which were published simultaneously in *Nature* and *National Geographic* on 25 June.

"Scientists say they have found birds' ancestor," read the 6 July headline in *US News and World Report*. The case is essentially closed, asserts this article, now that feathered dinosaurs are in hand. *National Geographic* — published by the society that helped fund the research — took much the same tone. The article mentioned that some scientists still doubt that birds descended from dinosaurs, but the skeptics were represented only by one mildly skeptical Chinese researcher — in an

article otherwise stuffed full of scientists who supported the headline on the cover: "Dinosaurs Take Wing. The Origin of Birds." Jennifer Ackerman writes: "These days, most paleontologists are convinced that birds are a subcategory of dinosaurs. 'The anatomical similarities are overwhelming,' says Mark Norell, chairman of the department of vertebrate paleontology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York."

But other reporters hearkened back to all those stories they'd written over the years on this debate. Recently, the role of doubting Thomas has been played predominantly by two ornithologists: Alan Feduccia at the University of North Carolina, and Larry Martin at the University of Kansas. John Noble Wilford at the *New York Times* called Feduccia for comment about the latest Chinese fossils. Feduccia dismissed the similarities as nothing more than parallel evolution.

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Larry Martin was likewise not moved. "There is every reason to think that *Caudipteryx* [one of the new feathered dinosaurs from China] was a ground-dwelling herbivore," he told the *Washington Post*. And, in an interview with me for National Public Radio, Martin added that *National Geographic* wouldn't be getting heaps of publicity for this find if the creature in question was anything short of the alleged missing link between birds and dinosaurs. To these scientists, the issue is almost personal.

In the stories where the skeptics are quoted, the paleontologists fire right back. The *Washington Post*, for example, quoted Norell of the American Museum of Natural History. He said the skepticism comes "from

the same guys who have been at it for a while. They don't deal with the same evidential realm of support that we do — they just say we're wrong." Actually, the debate at times appears to be just the opposite: sometimes, the argument is over anatomical features so arcane, journalists can be forgiven for never getting to the bottom of it.

A few writers have looked at this scientific feud as a sociological phenomenon all its own. Pat Shipman, a writer and anthropologist, attempted to deconstruct the argument in the 11 June issue of the *Guardian*. "Most of the skeptics who reject the dinosaur hypothesis are ... bird experts, not dinosaur specialists. They have therefore little to gain by welcoming dinosaurs into the avian family; it would only add uncertainty to their research. In contrast, dinosaurologists have enriched their ideas about dinosaur lifestyles immeasurably by detecting evidence of very birdlike behaviors such as nesting..."

The dinosaur folk also have public allure on their side — who wouldn't want to believe that the critters pecking away at the bird feeder are in fact living dinosaurs? Even so, a commentary in the *Los Angeles Times* asserted that children in that city were actually disappointed to learn that some dinosaurs had feathers. "The notion of a feathered killer goes against every bit of mythology, violates every snake-in-Eden stained-glass window: demons have scaly, leathern wings and the good guys, cherubim and seraphim, waft on wings of angel-down."

Commentator Patt Morrison went on to argue that it's actually good for children to learn that science is willing to change its mind when new evidence comes along. True enough — though the dinosaur/bird debate is not exactly an inspirational example of openmindedness in science.

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